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Paul McCartney, a love-song connoisseur, sang about Silly Love Songs. Hardly, writer Juan Rodriguez says — we've been singing love songs for 5,000 years. "Love hurts", "love stinks" or it can leave us "hooked on a feeling" or "dazed and confused." DARIO AYALA/MONTREAL GAZETTE

Music historian's labour of love

Ted Gioia gets to the heart of amour in Love Songs: The Hidden History

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Paul McCartney, the romantic Beatle, may have dredged up all the irony within him by coining the phrase "silly little love songs." Silly, yet no one is immune from songs with memorable lines that go straight to the heart. "Dance me to the end of love," invited Leonard Cohen. "Will you still love me tomorrow?" the Shirelles wantonly asked. "I can't stop loving you," wailed Ray Charles. "Love is like a heat wave, burning in my heart," admitted Martha & the Vandellas.

Love songs, like its subject, take so many forms that they can be a ball of confusion. "I want to know what love is," proffered Foreigner. "Love is strange," replied Mickey & Sylvia. When Robert Palmer sang the banal Addicted to Love, you might've felt sorry for him. Diana Ross had a "love hangover."

Ultimately, Roy Orbison saw matters of amour through dark lenses: "Love hurts," he sang plaintively, painfully. (And, lest we forget, "Love stinks," concluded the J. Geils Band.)

We've been singing love songs for 5,000 years, straddling the line between the sacred and profane, leaving us "hooked on a feeling" (Blue Suede) or "dazed and confused" (Led Zeppelin). Conflict and controversy have continually marked the history of this ubiquitous popular art form, according to music historian Ted Gioia in his fascinating new book Love Songs: The Hidden History (Oxford University Press). Gioia — author of The History of Jazz (the best single volume on the subject), Delta Blues, and Birth (and Death) of Cool, among others — spent 20 years researching "the main narrative of our lives" contained in the woefully "underestimated" love song genre.

"People looked at me smugly when I said I was working on a history of love songs," Gioia said over the phone last week. "They thought this wasn't a serious topic, that this music was 'lovey-dovey' and embarrassing, saccharine and sentimental. Yet about 90 per cent of the songs out there are about love, but music critics talk about the other 10 per cent.

"Interestingly, I discovered the ancient Romans thought no sane person would willingly fall in love, as it made you vulnerable, exposed. They tried to ridicule it. In many ways we're doing the same thing now, yet we can't get rid of love songs."

Gioia, 57, starts with Charles Darwin's theory that just as birds sing to attract the opposite sex, primeval man first used his voice in producing "true musical cadences" that were handy in courtship and ... "expressed various emotions, such as love, jealousy, triumph, and would have served as a challenge to rivals."

"Put simply," posits Gioia, "all songs were originally love songs."

"Previous histories of music," he says, "tended to focus on the performer, celebrities, but they almost never talked about how music changed the lives of listeners, communities, even whole societies. It's a source of enchantment, a change agent."

To elucidate on this overriding theme, Gioia "slowly and laboriously" waded through memoirs, travel literature, books on legends, folklore, histories — "but primarily early accounts from direct participants." (I counted 275 books in his bibliography.)

"But I was scared, because the love song is such a huge subject. I gained confidence and energy to complete the project by the surprising things I discovered that music historians had not uncovered.

"I didn't expect to constantly run into stories about violence, prohibitions, censorship, struggles in society related to love songs. If anything, I thought the story might be very sentimental. There was constant social upheaval related to the love song, in ancient China and Rome, in early medieval times. I also knew things from my own life — how controversial rock 'n' roll once was, how hip hop is still controversial."

For example the most famous 19th century song collector Francis James Child discovered ditties with subjects that "even the most transgressive contemporary singer would hesitate to mention," Gioia writes of the seduction ballad Child Owlet: "I challenge anyone to find another song that, in forty-eight short lines, deals with incest, seduction, adultery, self-mutilation, rape, torture, and murder."

"It gradually occurred to me that love songs have been an agent for expanding people's liberty, personal autonomy, coming from those who wanted more freedom over their love lives. The next thing that jumped out at me was that people who created innovations in love songs generally were marginalized individuals. They might be a slave, a woman, a bohemian, an outcast. It usually took the outsider daring enough to sing about things other people are afraid to. Many musical movements come from the least expected places. The Beatles from the forgotten city of Liverpool, and hip hop from poor inner-city people, also fit this paradigm.

"I had seen this with my own eyes but I didn't realize it had been going on for thousands of years!"

He discovered that the qiyan, the singing female slaves of the Islamic world, "invented the key elements of courtly love long before they were known in Europe." Their music spread into Europe via North Africa after the Muslim conquest of Spain. Gioia says he has multitudes of books on troubadours but none devoted to these females.

"I discovered that new ways of singing of love tended to threaten people — parents, priests, whoever. Again and again, I asked myself, 'What comes first? Do we sing of love in a new way and then change how we romance each other, or are changes in courtship greatly spurred by the songs?' I concluded that the songs change how we deal with love. If that weren't true there wouldn't have been so many church leaders constantly sermonizing that these terrible love songs had to be eradicated from society.

"Three penitentials, which guided priests hearing confessions, mentioned the singing of love songs as something that could not be forgiven! Excommunicated from the church! That tells you how extraordinarily controversial the love song was."

The explosion of pianos in 19th century parlours helped enable love songs to enter the mainstream. Young women were encouraged to sing and play ("parlour songs"); when a suitor arrived the large stationary instrument allowed parents to keep an eye on the potential lovers. "Entrenched on a piano bench in the parlour," Gioia writes, "a budding young woman could perform the most romantic songs, inflaming desire even while offering no means of satisfying it short of a formal proposal."

The invention of the microphone resulted in a new intimacy, epitomized by Rudy Vallee and Bing Crosby, singers who could confide rather than bellow at you. While radio and recordings gave love songs great exposure, Gioia homes in on the car radio (introduced in 1922) as the most liberating development, allowing young love to take its course without prying eyes.

Gioia says that the blues, raw or orchestrated, marked "the most important shift in songs about romance — and attitudes about romance — since the dawn of the troubadours." The blues expanded the love song vocabulary toward vivid images that made effete parlour songs obsolete. Thinly veiled explicit sexual references abounded. Ma Rainey: "If you don't like my ocean don't fish in my sea ... Stay out of my valley and let my mountains be." So-called "race records" carved a large niche in the marketplace; there's irony in blacks and former slaves passing along the only thing that belonged to them (music) to a willing white public.

More recently, the music video had "a profound impact on our culture, much more so than people realize," says Gioia. "It changed the role of the artist.

Roy Orbison

Being a musician was no longer sufficient — there were teams of choreographers, cinematographers, costumes, makeup, all the paraphernalia of a film production. It changed the love song, perhaps not for the best, because filmmakers needed to convey a story within the three- or four-minute duration of the song. How do you do that? You take clichéd sexualized images and just recycle them in video after video. Probably the most frequent one is what I call the Bob Fosse meme. Back in the 1950s, he started this visual trick of taking a female singer in her underwear and pairing her up with a guy in a uniform or a suit or a tuxedo. The woman undresses to thrill; the guy dresses to kill. Fifty years later, we still see videos sticking to the same stale old formula."

Gioia says Noel Coward's famous line, " 'Strange how potent cheap music is,' proves one of the main points of my book. He was expressing our — thing many of us feel, that the…e's something a little embarrassing about these sentimental songs, but they touch us still."

Gioia says he prides himself in listening to all song styles — over a thousand new albums last year. Asked to pluck just one love song as his favourite, he unhesitatingly chooses Lush Life by Billy Strayhorn.

"It's a love song in which he tells you how much he hates love. There's an amazing line: 'Romance is much, stifling those who strive, I'll be a lush life in some small dive. And there I'll be when I rot — with the rest of those whose lives are lonely, too.' Rot: what an amazing word to put in a love song! Yet the beauty of it is that you feel he's deeply in love. He has the most extreme denunciation of romance in pop music of that period, and all it does is show you how powerful love is."

rodriguez.music@gmail.com

Diana Ross sang about having a "love hangover" and had a hit with the song Endless Love. ED OUDENAARDEN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES FILES

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